

INTERROGATION

THEME SELECTION



FOR JIHADIST COMBATANTS

BY PHILIP A. MULLENIX

U.S. special operations forces operating in the Middle East, Africa or any theater of engagement with jihadist combatants may face the prospect of interrogating suspected terrorists. What approach should they take?

The interrogator's success will be determined largely by his selection of an interrogation *theme*, i.e., the argument (presented in monologue fashion by the interrogator to the suspect) that provides explanations and excuses that psychologically (not legally) justify the suspect's behavior. By justifying a suspect's behavior within the framework of that suspect's own mentality and beliefs, an interrogator facilitates the task of self incrimination.¹ Themes are carefully chosen by the interrogator after assessing a suspect's motives for engaging in the conduct under investigation as well as the suspect's education, personal traits, and background.²

It should be noted at the outset that interrogation themes for jihadist enemy combatants or terrorists are not universally applicable. For example, the choice of theme for a *Salafist* (a member of one of Islam's most radical sects in which jihad is obligatory) will be entirely different than the theme presented to an unemployed Moroccan engineer who has been taught by fundamentalist handlers that his economic opportunities have been stunted by Western capitalism. Both suspects are in the battle zone; both suspects have their hands on cell phones to trigger improvised explosive devices upon the American military; both are jihadist combatants; but each has a distinctively separate motive for engaging in the same conduct. As a result, themes that will succeed during the interrogation of the *Salafist* will fail to resonate with a disaffected unemployed engineer. Similarly, themes that will induce an economically despondent combatant to confess will be rejected with derision by the Islamic radical.

Therefore, effective choices among possible themes for the interrogation of jihadist combatants will be influenced by two factors. *First* is the Soldier's ability to size up the suspect for motivations, ideologies (including Islamic affiliation), education, personal traits and background. The *second* factor is the soldier's own military occu-

pational specialty, which may predetermine parameters such as interrogation location and the amount of time available for questioning.

Sizing up the suspect's motives, ideologies, education and background

Jihadist combatants fall into three broad categories for determination of underlying motives: a) fundamentalists; b) nationalists; and c) common criminals.

A: Fundamentalists

Islamic Fundamentalists are unconditionally committed to the political/religious doctrine mandated within *The Al Qaeda Jihad Training Manual*, namely "to do the work and undergo martyrdom for the purpose of achieving the goal and establishing the religion of majestic Allah on earth" in fulfillment of the belief "that governing the peoples' affairs is one of the greatest religious obligations."³ Tactically, *The Jihad Training Manual* advocates that a world-wide Islamic government could never be established except through violence. "Islam does not coincide or make truce with unbelief, but rather confronts it. The confrontation that Islam calls for with these godless apostate regimes does not know Socratic debates, Platonic ideals nor Aristotelian diplomacy. But it knows the dialogue of bullets, the ideals of assassination, bombing and destruction, and the diplomacy of the cannon and machine gun."⁴

Since its inception in 1928 and throughout the rule during the 1950's and 1960's of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, The Muslim Brotherhood set as its goal the creation of a theocratic Islamic state.⁵ That mantra surfaced again during the 1970's in the teachings of "The Blind Cleric," Sheikh Omar Abdel-Rachman, who not only advocated the creation of an Islamic state through a massive armed struggle, but he formed the Egyptian Islamic Jihad from among The Muslim Brotherhood, all in response to the 1979 Israeli peace agreement which had been forged in Washington, D.C., with Nasser's successor, Anwar Sadat, and the United States President

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Jimmy Carter. Two years after the agreement, Sadat was assassinated by followers of Rachman who subsequently emigrated to the United States where he provided inspiration to Ramzi Yousef (Khalid Sheikh Muhammad's nephew) to bomb the World Trade Center in 1993.

Rachman is now serving a life sentence at the Colorado federal supermax prison, ADX Florence, after being convicted of conspiring to blow up the Statue of Liberty, the UN and the Holland Tunnel.

In the immediate aftermath of Sadat's assassination, al-Qaeda's current leader, Egyptian Dr. Ayman Zawahiri, again repeated the call for the creation of an Islamic state, even while detained in prison for his suspected role in Sadat's killing.⁶ Al Qaeda, The Muslim Brotherhood, and splinter groups from both organizations remain viable today and advance these same causes to which their fundamentalist leaders have been committed for decades.

Why are these historical perspectives relevant to SOF interrogators today? Because they provide accurate insight into the reasons *why* Islamic militant terrorists want to kill Americans; and from those *motives* come the interrogation themes which appeal to the mentality and beliefs of the fundamentalist combatant. Consider three examples that appeal to the fundamentalists, in abbreviated format.

1. *Shift blame to America's support of Israel:* Islamic fundamentalists disdain America for its role in brokering the 1979 Egyptian

mentality and beliefs of the Islamic Fundamentalist, are viewed as the root cause of militant terrorism against Americans.

2) *Argue to the jihadist the 'moral superiority' of Islam:* Ahmed Sattar, who was an ideological follower and confidant of the previously discussed Omar Abdel-Rachman, was sentenced in October 2006 to serve 28 years in the same federal supermax prison in Colorado for assisting Rachman execute terrorist activities from jail during Rachman's trial. During a 1999 interview with journalist Lowell Bergman, Sattar stated: "The western mentality does not understand that your measurement of good and bad is different than the measurement of the people of the East." This thought is pervasive among Islamic fundamentalists, as their mindset reflects a belief that acts that are deemed criminal to Judeo-Christians are deemed moral by the jihadist terrorist. Against that background, Sattar concluded that it was moral to assassinate Sadat for what he did — entering into a peace treaty with Israel.⁷

Khalid Sheikh Muhammad adopted similar logic while admitting his role as operational director for Osama Bin Laden in 31 terrorist attacks around the world, including the 9/11 attack upon the United States. During his March 10, 2007 Combatant Status Review Tribunal Hearing at U.S. Naval Base Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, Muhammad invokes Allah as the sole arbiter of his conduct and the righteousness of his terrorist cause in furtherance of Allah's justice:

"So be an actor! Put aside anger, revenge and even conventional logic. Think outside the box to appeal to your audience."

Israeli peace agreement and for the United States' active assistance to Arab nations that have impeded the creation of an Islamic state. The interrogator should use that fact to craft a theme that will appeal to the fundamentalist's ideological frame of reference.

Understand that as an interrogator, the SOF operator must be an *actor*. Regardless of one's emotions in response to seeing the remnants of a Humvee and its occupants after a roadside bomb blast, the mission shifts to extracting information from a suspect who may have detonated the device. So be an actor! Put aside anger, revenge, and even conventional logic. Think outside the box to appeal to your audience. Focus now on establishing rapport with your enemy to gain information, even if it means showing insane empathy for the jihadist's "justifiable" and "understandable" conduct against Americans for our politicians' undying "support of Israel" and the "suppression of Islamists' rights to a Muslim state." Suggest that you "understand" that if the United States had "stayed out of the dispute between Israel and Egypt back in 1979" and had not supported the corrupt and anti-Islamic regimes" of Egyptian President Sadat and his successor Hosni Mubarak, the suspect wouldn't have had any dispute with Americans today. In so doing, the interrogator shifts blame from the suspect himself, depersonalizes the carnage against the interrogator's fellow Soldiers, and projects fault upon others who, within the

"If any fail to judge by the light, Allah *has revealed, they are no better than wrong doers, unbelievers and the unjust.*"⁸ As we know from the al-Qaeda Jihad Training Manual, the "light Allah has revealed" is the goal of "*establishing the religion of majestic Allah on earth*", at whatever cost to the infidels.⁹

How does the special operations field interrogator use this knowledge? He should develop a theme in which he suggests that what the suspect did "was morally justified to fulfill Allah's goal of establishing Islam on earth, just as Allah taught you." Show that you're willing to try to understand his perspective if he tells you the truth and accepts its consequences, because you know that "the jihadist's moral compass is beyond the comprehension of the Western mentality." Challenge the suspect to show you "the strength of their moral conviction and the superiority of Islam" by not only telling the truth but by "outwardly adopting their conduct to everyone as an act of faith in Allah."

In so doing, the interrogator's theme appeals to the fundamentalist's own frame of reference by drawing a distinction between indiscriminate killing of Americans versus the higher moral purpose of spreading Islam which, through the death of infidels, is a deification of Allah rather than a desecration of human life.

3. *Argue ideological 'maximization' of responsibility for jihadist attacks:* Fundamentalists willingly accept martyrdom for their cause, so

the fear of failure eclipses their fear of consequences such as death or incarceration at the hands of Western infidels.

In fact, their greater glory for Allah is derived by attribution to them of acts which we consider criminal. They believe that the more they are individually acknowledged for causing the death of Western infidels, the greater their reward from Allah.

Indeed, KSM proudly admitted his terrorist exploits during his Combatant Status Review Tribunal Hearing at Naval Base Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, as he showed no reluctance to maximize his role in spreading Islam through terrorism. At the same time, he sought martyrdom via a potential death sentence for his admitted crimes. When warned by the military judge of the prospect of execution if convicted for his confessed terrorist attacks, KSM responded: "Yes, *this is what I wish, to be a martyr for a long time. I will, God willing, have this by you.*"¹⁰

The special operations interrogator should integrate such logic into his themes. Argue that to achieve martyrdom, the suspect should accept blame in furtherance of the goal of establishing an Islamic state and to receive Allah's greatest rewards. It is certainly legitimate to use KSM's own expression of maximization of his role as the standard for all other fundamentalist jihadists to follow when challenged to accept responsibility in fulfillment of Allah's goals rather than to hide behind the denials of a weak infidel.

B: Nationalists

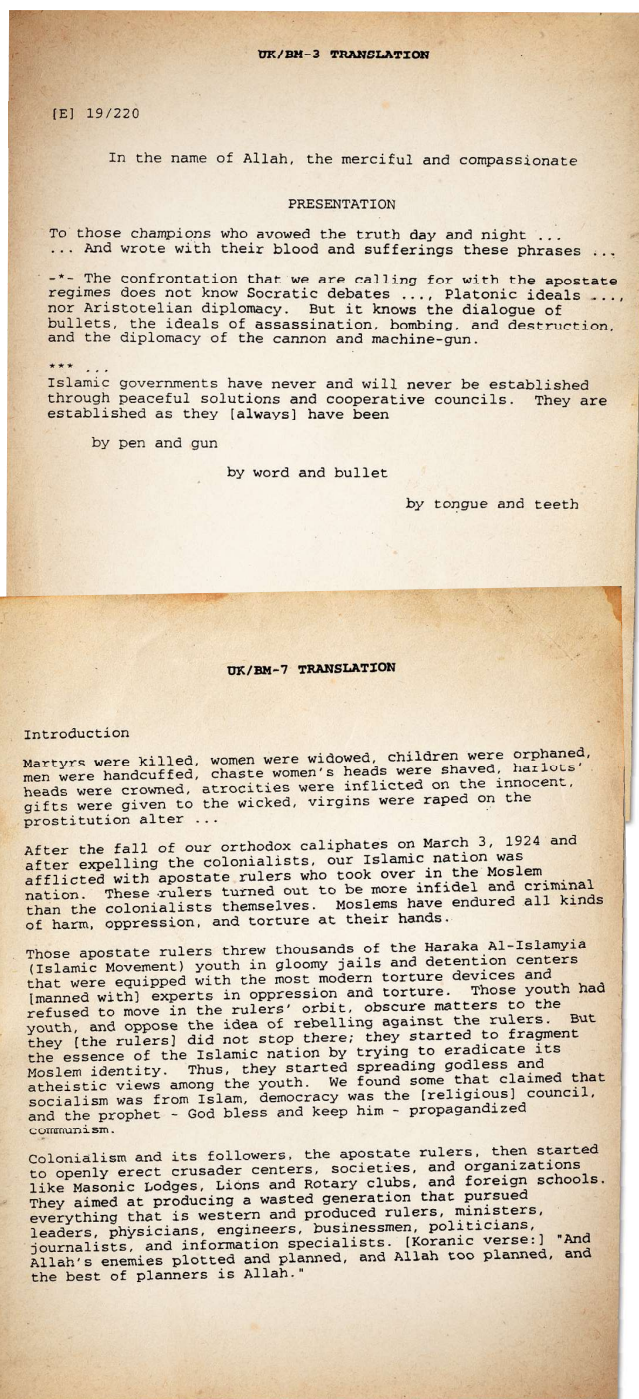
Nationalists are motivated less by Islamic fervor than by: 1) their resentment toward the presence of Western military forces in Muslim countries; and 2) the perception that Western capitalism unfairly impedes economic achievement among highly educated, yet unemployed, Muslims.

Professor Robert Pape of the University of Chicago studied attacks by 462 terrorists and concluded that "suicide terrorists attacks are not primarily an outgrowth of Islamic fundamentalism and are, almost always, part of an organized campaign to compel a modern democracy to withdraw military forces from territory that the terrorists consider home."¹¹

During his Combatant Status Review Tribunal Hearing at Guantanamo Bay, KSM confessed that he engaged in terrorist attacks as a legitimate means of attaining nationalist independence from Western occupation of Arab territory. In support of that argument, KSM drew an analogy between Islamic terrorism and the American Revolutionary War, and he compared Osama bin Laden to George Washington.¹² In making these statements, KSM relied upon that theme as a face saving device to justify his conduct. It is reasonable to infer that this same nationalistic theme will appeal to the mentality and beliefs of other jihadist combatants during interrogation.

Economic considerations motivate jihadist combatants as well. Capitalism is viewed as a force that represses achievement among educated Muslims who have little opportunity to develop professionally within the depressed economic environments in which they live.

Al-Qaeda in Yemen and Saudi Arabia merged during 2009 into al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula — based in Yemen where more than 40 percent of the people live in poverty and the population is expected to double to more than 40 million by 2030. In addition, Yemen's 2.8 billion barrels of oil reserves, which fund approximately 70 percent of the



INSIGHT Two pages from the translated version of the Al Qaeda Jihad Training Manual which was located by the Manchester (England) Metropolitan Police during a search of an Al Qaeda member's home in 2000. The manual was found in a computer file described as "the military series" related to the "Declaration of Jihad" and was introduced that year as evidence in the trial of the East African embassy bombers in New York. Documents like this can be helpful to interrogators seeking to understand the mindset of jihadist combatants. The full translated manual can be downloaded at http://www.justice.gov/ag/manualpart1_1.pdf.

JIHADIST COMBATANT CATEGORIES QUICK REFERENCE

Interrogation themes help provide explanations and excuses that psychologically (not legally) justify the suspect's behavior. By justifying a suspect's behavior within the framework of that suspect's own mentality and beliefs, an interrogator facilitates the task of self incrimination. Themes are carefully chosen by the interrogator after assessing a suspect's motives for engaging in the conduct under investigation as well as the suspect's education, personal traits and background. Typically, jihadist combatants fall into three broad categories:

A. Fundamentalists

Motivation: Martyrdom for the purpose of establishing the religion of Allah on earth and in fulfillment of the belief that governing peoples' affairs is one of the greatest religious obligations.

Commitment: Political/Religious.

Vulnerability: Fear of Failure.

Theme: Argue that to achieve martyrdom, the suspect should accept blame in furtherance of the goal of establishing an Islamic state and to receive Allah's greatest rewards. Utilize ideological "maximization" of his role as the standard for all other Fundamentalist jihadists to follow when challenged to accept responsibility in fulfillment of Allah's goals rather than to hide behind the denials of a weak infidel.

B. Nationalists

Motivation: Resentment toward the presence of Western military forces in Muslim countries and/or the perception that Western capitalism unfairly impedes economic achievement for Muslims.

Commitment: Country/Economics.

Vulnerability: Independence. Economic necessity.

Theme: Suggest that you understand that by committing the act of violence the suspect was doing nothing more than trying to *fight for his rights*. Contrast that with the intent to indiscriminately murder and justify the conduct of the combatant within the framework of his own mentality and beliefs.

C. Common Criminals

Motivation: Same as domestic criminals, greed, revenge or simple gang mentality.

Commitment: Only to self.

Vulnerability: Self preservation and the consequences of their conduct. These actors will make an admission if they believe it to be in their best interest to cooperate.

Theme: Display your belief in the idea that the suspect is just trying to make it in a tough world where he has to do what everyone else is doing just to belong and survive.

national budget, will run dry in the next decade.¹³ Snowballing poverty and an exploding population create a dangerous crucible within which fundamentalists can cultivate jihadists by fomenting anti-capitalism and hatred of American "economic repression."

Marc Sageman, a former member of the CIA's Afghan task force, observed that many educated professionals in the Muslim world suffer social frustration as a result of a lack of employment opportunities in the region.¹⁴ Steffen Hertog, professor at the Institute for Political Studies in Paris, said during a 2009 presentation to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: "There is a positive correlation between the degree of education and the level of extremism." He noted that engineers and engineering students make up nearly half of Islamic militants involved in high profile attacks, including more than a third of those involved in the 9/11 attack upon the United States.

What does this mean to a special operations interrogator? It means that if he first seeks information from the suspect about his background, education and profession, the interrogator may accurately discern that economic necessity, rather than Islamic radicalism, motivated the suspect to jihad. If the suspect's mentality and beliefs have been formed through inculcation by Islamic handlers that America's economic bullies prevented the suspect, despite education or advanced engineering degrees, from practicing his profession and earning a living for his family, then the interrogation theme becomes obvious. Suggest to the suspect you understand that by triggering the roadside bomb the suspect was doing nothing more than trying to *fight for the right* to support his family, to educate his children, to practice the profession that he spent so many years studying to achieve and to live with dignity. By contrasting that with the intent to indiscriminately murder Americans, the interrogator justifies the conduct of the jihadist combatant within the framework of the nationalist's own mentality and beliefs, thereby opening the door to an admission.

C: Common Criminals

Common criminals are motivated by the same incentives as domestic criminals, such as greed, revenge or simple gang mentality. Their commitment is not to religion, culture or nation; it is to themselves. Unlike fundamentalists, who only fear failure, the common criminal's instinct is self preservation; and the consequences of their conduct remain their vulnerability. They will make admissions if they believe it to be in their best interests to cooperate, including providing intelligence on their colleagues if it means possible freedom, perks or other forms of favorable treatment.

For the special operations interrogator, a brief background interview with this category of jihadist will reveal their motivations. Themes can be adapted to minimize their conduct, blame others for drawing them into the 'gang' or for forcing them to do what they did.

Display your belief that the suspect is just trying to make it in a tough world where he has to do what everyone else is doing just to belong to their group and to survive — no different than a kid on the mean streets of any city in America.

Remember, it's the interrogator's obligation to 'play the part' despite what he really feels toward the suspect or the suspect's conduct.

This is a key component to successful development of the interrogation theme, regardless of which theme is chosen.

The Soldier's MOS

The special operator's MOS will affect theme selection for an interrogation, including where an interrogation may take place, the amount of time available for the interrogation, identification of the Islamic sect to which a suspect belongs, recognition of interrogation countermeasures and the protocol for use of an interpreter when necessary.

Time is an asset to an interrogator — the more he has, the greater the likelihood of success. If one's MOS provides *only* brief encounters in the field, the strategy (including choice of theme) may differ from the circumstance of interrogation over many months within the controlled environment of a detention facility.

Simplicity is preferred during a field interrogation in which the window of opportunity is mere minutes. Choices among themes should be limited only to those with which the interrogator is most comfortable. But when the interrogation opportunity expands to hours or days, creativity in theme selection broadens. Either way, however, a nonaccusatory interview should precede any interrogation to provide an opportunity to assess behavior symptoms, inquire into the suspect's background, education, ideology, and motivations as well as obtain the suspect's version of any facts which may be in dispute.

Identification of jihadist affiliation is useful in understanding the motives of the disparate groups and, therefore, accurately selecting themes to fit the suspect or witness being interrogated. Reference was made earlier within this article to the Saudi-based radical Islamic sect 'Salafism' (an extreme form of Sunni Islam that rejects democracy and Shia rule) as well as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, which is likely to soon merge with al-Shabab in Somalia. Al-Qaeda itself had its origins in Afghanistan during the early 1980s when Osama bin Laden compiled literally a 'black book' list of Mujadeen fighters (which bin Laden named "the base", i.e., a literal translation of the Arabic "al-Qaeda") upon whom bin Laden could call for support in the war against the Soviet Union. Its Taliban counterpart today in Afghanistan is the Pakistan based 'Haqqani Network' which presently represents the most formidable threat to American military operations even as The Muslim Brotherhood is re-emerging in Egypt. While not within America's current theater of military engagement, Nigeria's Boko Haram has violently moved against UN facilities in its opposition to Western culture and in pursuit of its imposition of a strict Islamic state. It is not unreasonable to foresee the use of American military forces within a multinational effort to defend the UN abroad against terrorist attacks.

Each such group has its separate origins, but all share a commitment to wage jihad against "enemies of Islam," including the United States. The informed special operations interrogator needs to become familiar with these groups, their respective ideologies, priorities, and motivations as a prelude to effective theme development during future interrogations of their members.

Interpreters pose challenges which must be accommodated. Direct communication with the suspect is preferred to assure clarity of the

words being exchanged and to maximize the effectiveness of verbal, paralinguistic, and non-verbal behavioral cues during the interrogation. When an interpreter is necessary, the interpreter should be briefed in advance regarding protocol so that the interpreter knows to precisely translate *only* that which is actually said without paraphrasing or editing. If logistics permit, the interpreter should remain outside the suspect's field of vision. Alternatively, if the suspect sustains eye contact and hand gestures with the interpreter alone, then the interrogator should physically interject himself into the suspect's field of vision and indicate to the suspect to speak directly to the interrogator.

Finally, cognizance should be given at the military operations level to the interrogation countermeasures that are taught to jihadists within the al-Qaeda Training Manual, including *preparation of disinformation, noncompliance, monitoring behavior symptoms, defiance and sheer denial*.¹⁵ Tactically, the special operations interrogator should be aware not only that such countermeasures are taught to jihadist combatants but also to recognize them when applied and how to patiently overcome them.

Conclusion

Theme selection, like interrogation itself, is an art. The challenge presented by jihadist motivations can tax the creative imagination of even the most experienced interrogator. Essential to the process is an understanding of the mentality and beliefs of the jihadist as well as extraordinary self control by the SOF interrogator in maintaining his poise and presence of mind while face to face with an irrational enemy who may literally have American blood on his hands. **SW**

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Notes

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